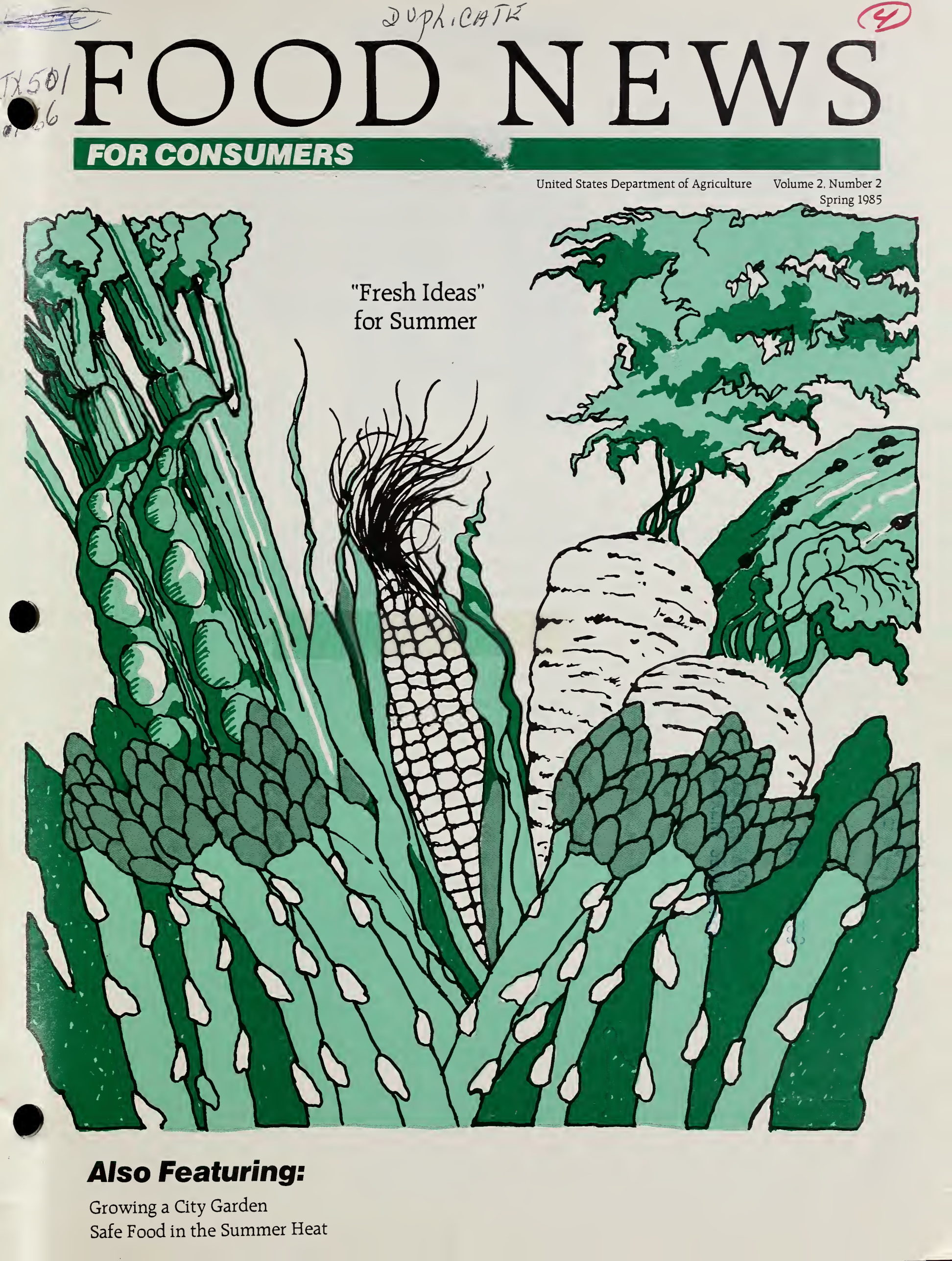


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FOOD NEWS

FOR CONSUMERS

United States Department of Agriculture Volume 2, Number 2
Spring 1985

"Fresh Ideas"
for Summer

Also Featuring:
Growing a City Garden
Safe Food in the Summer Heat

FOOD NEWS

FOR CONSUMERS

Spring 1985
Vol. 2, No. 2

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PERSPECTIVES



Dear Reader:

As warm weather approaches, being outdoors sounds more and more appealing. We begin working and relaxing outdoors, growing fresh vegetables and flowers, camping, picnicking, and cooking on the grill — all out in the fresh air.

This issue of "Food News for Consumers" contains fresh ideas for gardening in cities and small spaces, buying fresh

fruits and vegetables, experimenting with fresh herbs and spices, and making the most of new products, information and services at the supermarket.

As the seasons change, the questions consumers ask the staffers of the Meat and Poultry Hotline change too. Some of these typical warm weather questions (see p. 11) may be ones you've had about handling meat and poultry during the hottest season of the year.

And our regular feature, the Consumer's Almanac provides information about events that promote fresh foods that are at their seasonal peak.

We hope some of our fresh ideas will help you plan a relaxing, enjoyable, food-safe summer.

Sincerely,

Ann Collins Chadwick

ANN COLLINS CHADWICK, Director
Office of the Consumer Advisor

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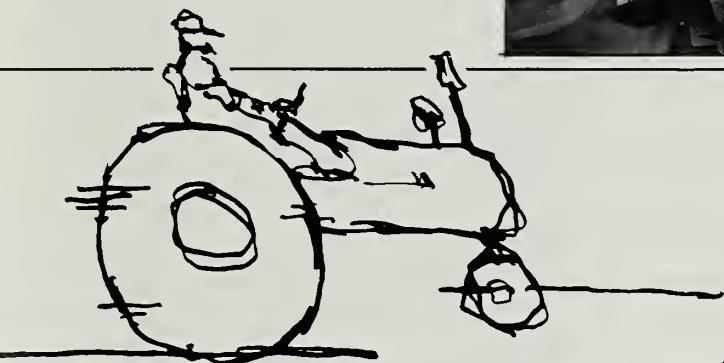
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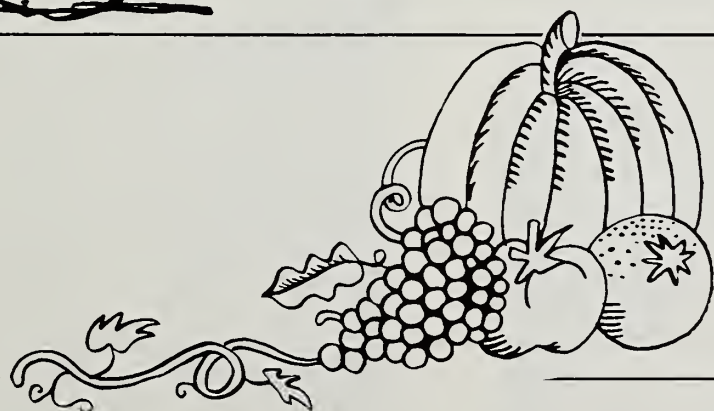


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CONSUMER EDUCATION

What's New At The Supermarket?

Supermarkets as we know them today, have been around since the late Sylvan N. Goldman invented the shopping cart in 1939. And, as with many American institutions, we tend to take supermarkets for granted. If you haven't taken a good look at your supermarket lately, consider making your next shopping trip a more leisurely excursion. Today's supermarkets are vital places that offer important food information, sell dozens of new foods and provide valuable consumer services.

Information

A recent consumer survey found that 95 percent of consumers are interested in nutrition. It is therefore not surprising that nutrition is the centerpiece of many supermarket consumer information programs.

Nutrition information — particularly sodium content — is available on an increasing number of food labels. Many supermarkets supplement this nutrition information with color-coded shelf tags to alert shoppers to foods with reduced sugar, sodium, fat, cholesterol and calories — or to products naturally low in these elements. Supermarkets also often have nutrition information on posters in produce, dairy and meat departments; through in-store home economists; and even on videotapes. Free recipes often provide nutrition information and suggestions on recipe variations that reduce calories or sodium content.

Subjects of nutrition programs range from basic nutrition information to special help for consumers

with health problems such as hypertension or diabetes. Information may also be provided for specific audiences such as older people, pregnant women, athletes and parents of infants and toddlers.

Supermarkets also make available information on other food topics: food safety, preparation and storage; making the most of money spent for food; and unit pricing and open dating information. Unit pricing helps consumers compare the cost per pound of different brands and sizes of the same product.

Supermarket shoppers may soon not need the pamphlets some supermarkets provide to unlock the mysteries of open dating. Many segments of the food industry now support a voluntary, uniform dating system using only a "sell by" date, with appropriate "best if used by" information related to that date. An open dating guide to freshness is more useful to consumers when alphabetic month designations or abbreviations (such as "Best if used by May 15, 1985") are used.

New Products

We all want foods that are safe, nutritious, wholesome, fresh and properly labeled. And we want them to look and taste good. Some of us need to eat foods low in sodium, sugar, fat and calories. Supermarkets respond to our wants and needs by offering dozens of new products each year.

Many supermarkets now feature ungraded, leaner red meats as well as "USDA Choice" cuts, reflecting the preference of some consumers for red meat that is lower in fat. And some stores have an old-fashioned meat case displaying prime and specialty meats, and a butcher to cut steaks, chops and roasts to order. New processed meats include many that are lower in sodium and fat and have nutrition information on the label.

The produce department has an abundance of new vegetables and fruits: new varieties of lettuce, apples,

grapes, oranges and mushrooms; exotic foods such as bok choy, Chinese okra and kiwi fruit; and completely new foods such as sugar snap peas.

Bulk foods, a recent packaging trend, have come full circle since the days of the corner market. Shoppers can buy just what they need, eliminating waste and spoilage. Bulk foods also offer another advantage: they may cost less because they have not been individually packaged and have been handled less by those in the food industry.

Some stores have more than 140 varieties of bulk foods, including sugar, flour, pasta, beans, grains, nuts, spices and dried fruits. Ingredient listings and use instructions, when required, are posted on the barrel or bin that contains the product.



Services

Supermarkets provide more than interesting, nutritious new foods and information to help shoppers make sensible buying decisions. They also offer services unthought-of by the corner market: one-stop shopping, extended hours (sometimes 24-hour service), faster check-out, better complaint handling systems and special services for older shoppers.

Supermarkets recognize that handling consumer complaints well increases customer satisfaction, and almost all make it easy for shoppers to "take it to the manager." Some display postage-paid comment cards for consumers who want to make suggestions or register complaints, but can't spare the time right then.

As if these services weren't enough, some supermarkets employ home economists who advise customers on nutrition, food safety, making complaints about foods and planning parties. Supermarket home economists may teach classes on nutrition, microwave cookery or preparing ethnic foods.

American food shoppers are a diverse group today. The full-time homemaker is no longer your typical food shopper. Some consumers have little time for food shopping or food preparation. Others cook "from scratch." Some shoppers are price-conscious. Others aren't and frequent the deli and specialty food sections.

Supermarkets respond to the needs and preferences of all of these shoppers. So, next time you're shopping, take some time to look at your supermarket with a fresh eye.

— Ann C. Chadwick

For more information, contact: Ann Collins Chadwick, Director, Office of the Consumer Advisor, Room 232-W, Administration Building, U.S. Department of Agriculture, Washington, DC 20250; telephone (202) 382-9681; or Dagmar Farr, Director of Consumer Affairs, Food Marketing Institute, 1750 K Street, NW, Washington, DC 20006; telephone (202) 452-8444.

Buying and Cooking Quick-Chilled Chicken

Consumers calling the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Meat and Poultry Hotline (202/472-4485) have expressed concern about buying poultry that is labeled "fresh," only to discover at home that it seems partially frozen. Are these buyers the victims of deceptive labeling?

"No," says Robert Cook, with USDA's Food Safety and Inspection Service. "A poultry product may be labeled fresh as long as it is not completely frozen."

"Even though there may be a slight frozen crust on the surface of the bird, poultry is only classified as frozen when the product is held at 0°F until it is frozen solid."

"In recent years new poultry processing techniques have been developed to provide a readily available supply of safe, fresh poultry for the consumer," Cook adds. "Most poultry plants now pack poultry in ice and hold it at 28°F or chill the birds with nitrogen. The result of these quick-chilling processes is a slight crusting of ice crystals on the surface of the bird. Though the surface feels frozen, the inside of the bird is not. Therefore, the bird is still basically fresh."

These quick-chill techniques remove body heat from the poultry and preserve it en route to the supermarket. Once at the store, it will remain fresh in the refrigerator case for five to seven days, says Cook.

"Since fresh poultry crusted with ice crystals is not frozen, consumers can cook it using the same temperature and cooking time as used for unfrozen poultry," says Betsy Crosby, a USDA home economist.

While the poultry industry, grocers and USDA work to ensure a safe and wholesome product for consumers, the responsibility for maintaining safe food ultimately rests with the consumer once the product is purchased. The following tips should help:

- Perishables should be purchased last in the market.
- Perishables should never be left in the car while running errands, but should be taken home promptly and refrigerated.
- The product may be left in the store wrap unless it's torn. If the wrap is torn, then the poultry should be re-wrapped to prevent moisture loss.
- Fresh poultry should be used within one-to-two days after purchase.



- All poultry should be washed before cooking.

- Hands, countertops and utensils should be thoroughly washed between handling raw poultry and cooked poultry to avoid cross-contamination.

- Poultry (frozen, uncooked or cooked), or any other perishable food, should never be left at room temperature for over two hours.

— Liz Lapping

Little Space? Try a Little City Gardening

For most people, thoughts of city life mean heavy traffic, concrete and subways.

For the city dweller, thoughts of fresh fruits and vegetables may be associated with supermarkets. But, what about "freshness" as in home-grown vegetables, gardening?

Home-grown vegetables? A garden in the city? Yes!

Urban dweller and gardener are not mutually exclusive titles. With a foot-long window box or a five-gallon trash can, an urban dweller can instantly become a gardener. A little know-how, a little creativity, plus a little space, can equal a little garden. It's that simple!

How little space? Oh, let's say at least six inches. Chives, used to flavor many dishes, can thrive in a pot six inches in diameter. Radishes, onions, and "Tiny Tim" (miniature) tomatoes can flourish in a ten-inch pot.

Got a little more space? Try a five-gallon plastic trash can as a garden plot. The modern trash can comes in many different colors. Be bold! How many people on your block have a tomato plant growing in a five-gallon, hot pink garbage can?

Other ready-made containers — some specifically designed for growing plants — make excellent homes for larger vegetable plants, such as cucumbers. Creative use of everyday materials can also help create your garden. A plastic clothes basket lined with a plastic bag, or plastic jugs with holes punched in the sides, allow plants to grow in the most unlikely



places. And, of course, trellises are great space savers. They allow fruit and vegetable plants to grow upward, so you gain more gardening space.

The National Country Garden, housed at USDA's National Arboretum, in Washington, D.C., uses any and almost everything to prove that neither urban life nor limited space can stop a garden whose time has come.

Household rejects, such as egg cartons and aluminum pie pans, are put to good use in their garden. Other

garden delights include plastic pots strung from a knotted clothesline between two 4-foot posts.

USDA's country garden has a number of interesting concepts that are adaptable for city gardening. Plastic bags and old tires are homes for vegetables, herbs, flowers and plants. Stacked plastic boxes, called "Living Walls," can make caring for plants easier. They allow plants to be watered from the top down, and add style as plants grow out of the sides of the containers. Old milk crates can create a less expensive version of the "Living Wall" concept.

Gardens, sunlight, freshness? Maybe it's too much for an urbanite to take all at once. Okay, let's try something that sounds similar to what you're used to — synthetic soil.

Usually prepared from a mixture of vermiculite, peat moss, and fertilizer, synthetic or artificial soil is free of disease-carrying bugs and dreaded weed seeds. Synthetic soil is also lightweight, portable, and holds both moisture and plant nutrients well.

But, no matter how much — or how little — space you have, or how creative you've been, you still need good quality seeds. Make sure your seeds aren't too old, and don't plant last year's seeds. Older seeds often germinate poorly and don't grow as well as more recently produced seeds. It's a good idea to select disease and insect resistant seeds when possible. Also, you may want to find out which seeds grow best in your area.

So stake out your six inches of soil and try your hand at urban gardening. At best you'll find you have a green thumb, at worst you'll have dirty fingernails.

For more information contact: the Education Office, U.S. National Arboretum, Washington, DC 20002, (202) 475-4815; or your county extension agent, listed under state or local government in the telephone directory.

— Richard Bryant

1984 Report on Meat and Poultry Inspection Available

More than 99 percent of the cattle, hogs and poultry inspected by the U.S. Department of Agriculture in fiscal year 1984 were free of disease, contamination and adulteration according to USDA's annual report to Congress. The remainder were removed from the food supply by USDA meat and poultry inspectors.

More than 8,000 Federal inspectors worked in more than 7,000 slaughtering and processing plants. They inspected — both before and after slaughter — almost 4.6 billion poultry, just slightly above 1983, and almost 128 million swine, cattle, calves and other meat animals, compared to 122 million in 1983.

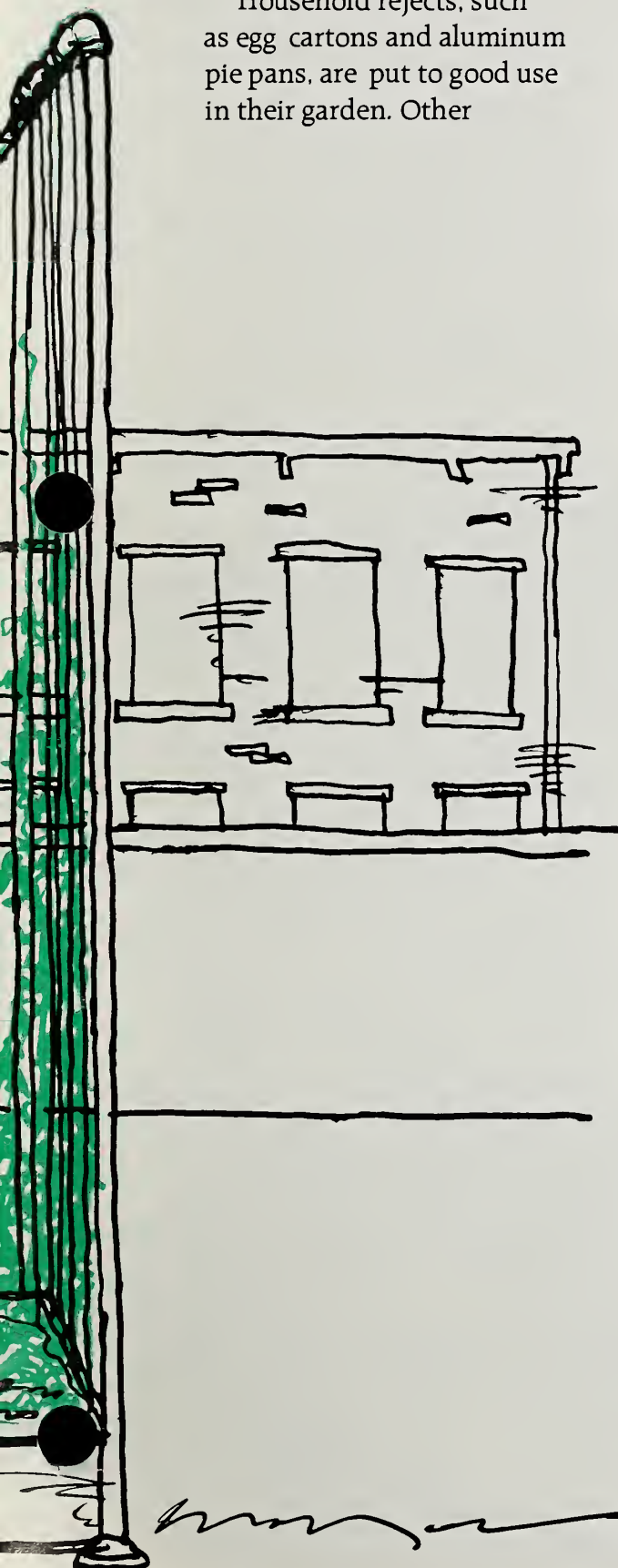
The USDA inspectors also oversaw the manufacturing and labeling of almost 120 billion pounds of processed products such as turkey ham, beef stew, chicken franks and frozen meat pizzas, up 7.5 billion pounds from 1983.

Labels on federally inspected meat and poultry products must be approved by USDA before the products are sold to ensure accurate listing of ingredients and truthful packaging. In 1984 almost 130,000 labels were approved.

These and other important facts about USDA's meat and poultry inspection program are found within the pages of "Meat and Poultry Inspection, 1984: Report of the Secretary of Agriculture to the U.S. Congress." The report summarizes domestic, export and import inspection; describes the organizational structure of the Food Safety and Inspection Service, the USDA agency that carries out Federal inspection; and summarizes inspection initiatives and accomplishments. The report is required by law and must be submitted to the U.S. Congress by March 1 each year.

Copies may be requested from: USDA-FSIS Public Awareness, Room 1163 South Building, Washington, DC 20250.

— Sharin Sachs



SPECIAL FEATURE

Finding the Fresh Produce

Hallelujah! The long winter is over. Fresh fruit and vegetable stands bloom along the roadside once more.

With summer's progress, pick-your-own farms will also start into operation.

As a food writer, how can you steer your readers to all this healthy largesse?

Your County Extension Office Knows if Old MacDonald Has a Pick-Your-Own Farm. "As city dwellers, many of your readers may not be aware that there's a USDA Cooperative Extension office to serve them," said Lillie Vincent, a consumer affairs specialist in USDA's Office of Information. The Extension office is usually listed with the county or state government section in the local phone book. Ask for the county agent or extension home economist when you call.

"The extension people are the experts on local growing trends," Vincent said. "Many county offices put out a crop list showing when local foods are ready for harvest. Some also have lists of pick-your-own farms."

Where are the Farmers' Markets? For city dwellers who may not have a way to get out to pick-their-own, there's a new upswing in city-located farmers' markets. A farm group may come in and set up a Saturday morning market in a parking lot, for instance. Many towns now have several such markets. To find what's happening in your area, call local farmers' marketing groups. If you can't find them in the phone book, the USDA County Extension office or the

local Chamber of Commerce should be able to help.

Larry Summers, chief of the Marketing Facilities Branch for USDA's Agricultural Marketing Service, advised that in some states, farmers' markets are closely connected with the state department of agriculture. You might call them. In other areas, he said, the farmers' groups may be aligned with city or state governments.

What kind of seasonality and price advice can you get from farmers' markets? It all depends, Summers said, on how sophisticated they are. "More professional marketers," he said, "can tell you nearly everything: 'We'll have x-bushels of peaches this Saturday. It was a good crop and they're especially sweet, although you should expect some bruising. The price will run about \$x-dollars a pound.'" More informal groups may have less information to offer.

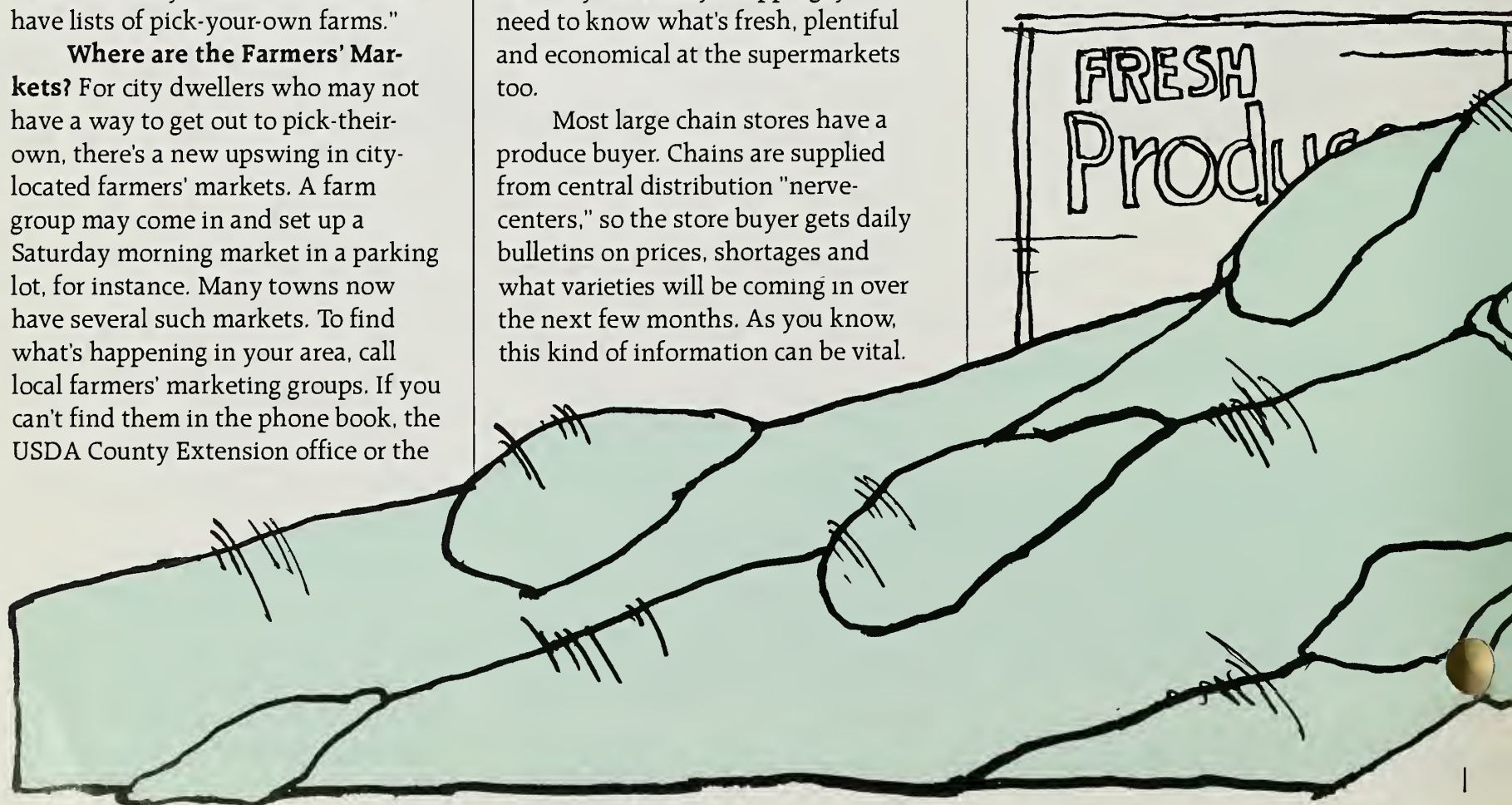
Know the Produce Buyers at Your Local Chain Stores. Many people may not have access either to pick-your-own farms or to farmers' markets. For their benefit, as well as for everyone's daily shopping, you need to know what's fresh, plentiful and economical at the supermarkets too.

Most large chain stores have a produce buyer. Chains are supplied from central distribution "nerve-centers," so the store buyer gets daily bulletins on prices, shortages and what varieties will be coming in over the next few months. As you know, this kind of information can be vital.

Even the world's best kumquat article, with 50 mouth-watering kumquat recipes, won't work if on the day of publication there isn't a single kumquat in town!

Jerry Purdy, director of Produce Operations for Giant Food Inc., a grocery store chain operating in Maryland, Virginia and the District of Columbia, explained how this kind of food editor's nightmare could happen. "I'm thinking of a problem we could have early this year with zucchini squash," Purdy said. "I buy squash for our stores all over the mid-Atlantic states. My usual suppliers are in Florida, but the freeze has dried them up. So I'm buying from Mexico. Now, if something should go wrong there, and I had to go to the [Caribbean] islands, that could really make it hard for people to find squash. And it would throw the price way up. Squash they're used to buying for a dollar-something could jump to over \$2 dollars a pound."

When to Call the Wholesale Grocers. When you need to assess the effects of a major crisis, like last winter's freak Florida freeze, or you have



to project price trends for the next six months, it's time to talk to the folks who keep tabs nationally on fresh produce. That's the kind of expertise, says Dennis Zegar, who represents the National American Wholesale Grocers Association, that his organization has.

Zegar's group represents roughly 1,000 full-time supermarket suppliers serving about a third of the nation's stores. "Full-line," Zegar said, "means our members sell everything from cat food to diapers."

Zegar says he's happy to talk to food writers. "Let's say you're doing a piece on oranges," he said. "You need to know what's going to happen to fresh orange prices over the summer, what will happen to frozen orange

juice, orange cake mixes, you name it. This is the kind of problem only the wholesaler can help with, because only the wholesaler has an overview of all orange-related products." Zegar's number is (703) 532-9400. Contact your area wholesalers through your local retailers.

Research — Sand Plums and Silver Queen Corn. Often you're researching beyond price and availability. You may want to know why fresh corn loses that crisp, indescribable, just-picked flavor so fast.* You could be looking into how to make jelly with a local wild fruit, like the sand plum that grows along creek beds in some parts of Oklahoma. Or you need some information about a mild new onion USDA has developed

called "Sweet Sandwich." Where can you find this kind of help?

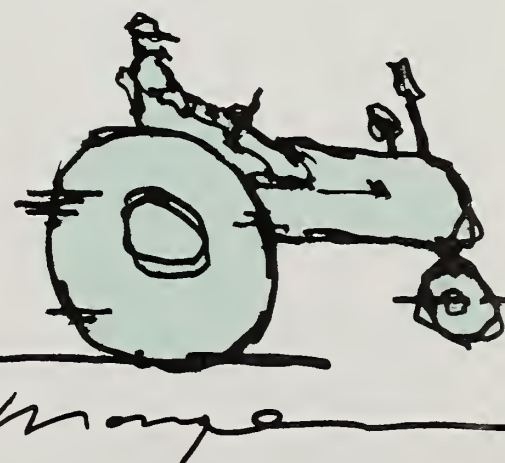
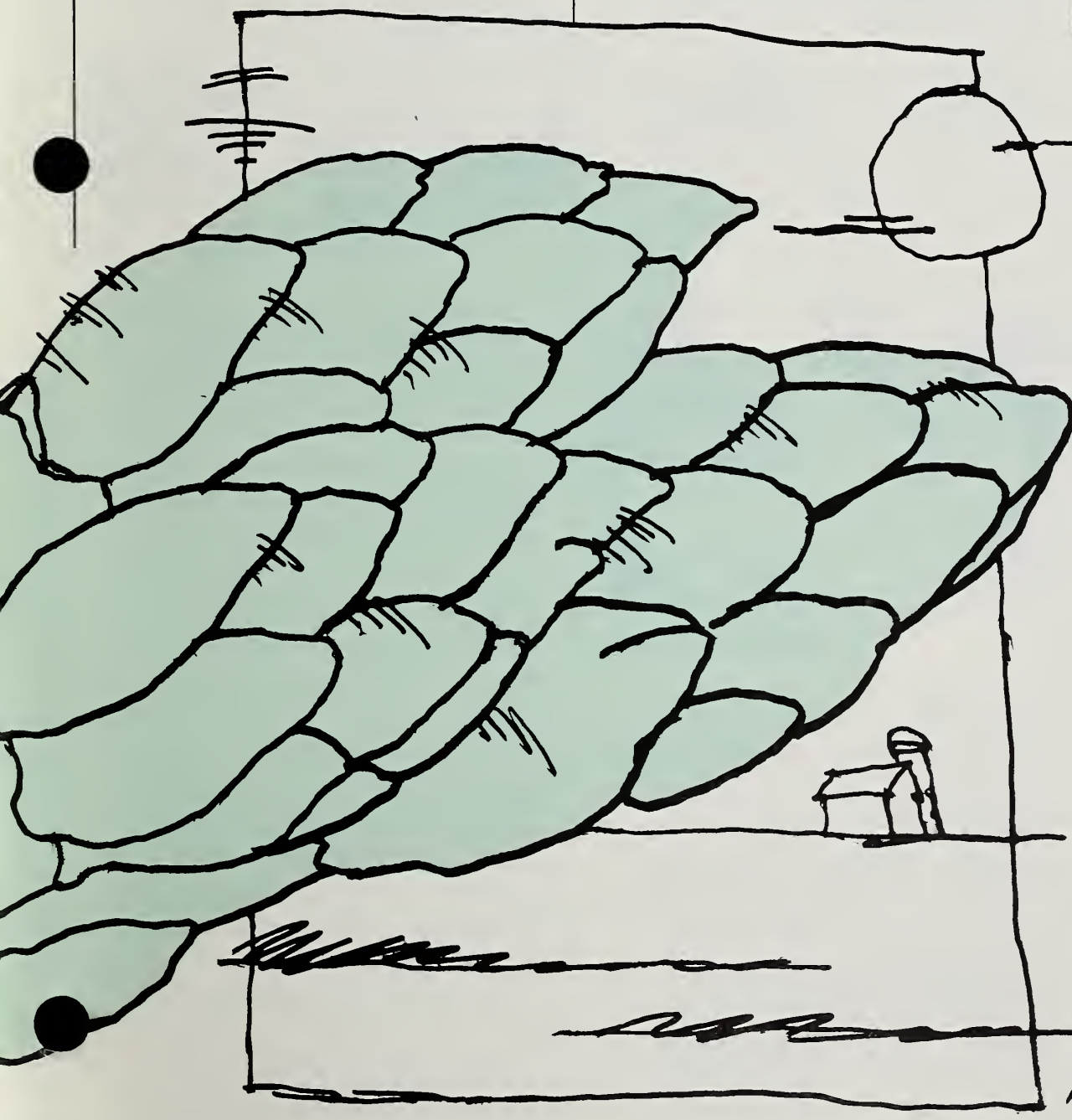
"There are a number of places you can go for these answers," said Dr. Walter Mertz, director of USDA's Human Nutrition Research Center, "but probably your best solution is to talk to an Extension specialist at your local land-grant college. The specialist may have the data, or refer you to someone on the nutrition faculty who can help."

"For more complex issues, you might want to call the Human Nutrition Information Service office in Hyattsville, Maryland," Mertz said. Betty Peterkin, the associate administrator, can be reached on (301) 436-7725.

Well, now you know where to go and who to call with many of your fresh produce questions. Could you also use a good desk reference on the subject? You can order the *Nutritive Value of American Foods in Common Units* (USDA: 1975, 291 pages, indexed) from the U.S. Government Printing Office. The full cite is *Agriculture Handbook No. 456*, GPO 001-000-03184-8. \$8.50. Send a check to the Superintendent of Documents, USGPO, Washington, D.C. 20402.

— Mary Ann Parmley

*Corn loses sweetness quickly after picking, because its natural sugars rapidly convert to starch. This leaves that heavy, glutinous taste you associate with corn unless you've eaten it straight off the stalk.



Choosing Fresh. This guide to the selection of fresh vegetables should see your readers through the produce section at the supermarket and the tempting piles of fresh goods at roadside stands and farmers' markets. It gives home storage hints too. For details on what to look for in the field at pick-your-own farms, they should consult the farm management.

Artichokes ... Choose compact, heavy, plump globes with large tightly clinging leaf scales of olive green color. Size is not an important quality factor in choosing artichokes.



Asparagus ... Spears should be fresh and firm with compact closed tips. Select spears with large amount of green.

Beans, snap ... Pods should be firm, crisp and slender with good green color.

Broccoli ... Look for compact bud clusters. Color varies from dark green, sage green or purplish-green, depending on variety. Yellow and wilted leaves indicate aging.

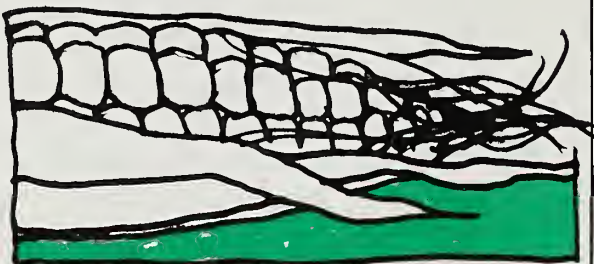
Brussels Sprouts ... Should be firm, compact and with bright leaves. Avoid wilted or yellow leaves.

Cabbage ... Heads should be reasonably solid and heavy in relation to size, with green outer leaves (except, of course, red cabbage.).

Carrots ... Look for firm, well-shaped roots with a good orange color.

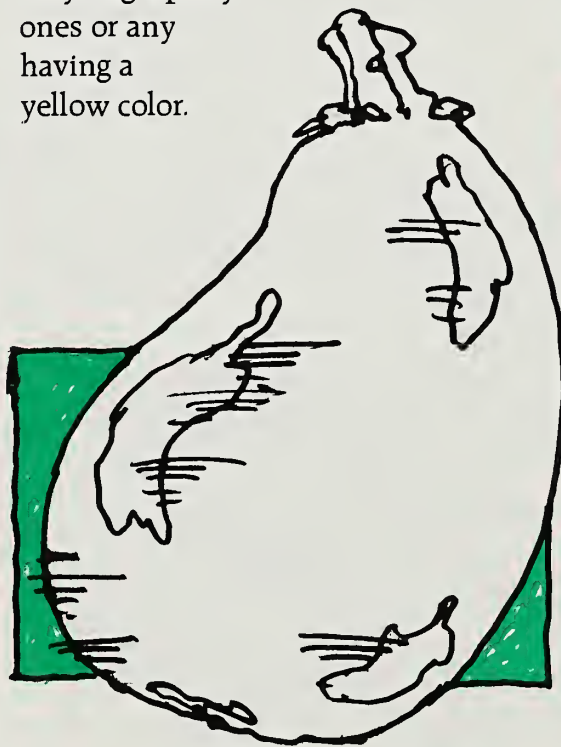
Cauliflower ... White or creamy-white, firm compact florets indicate good quality. Size of head bears no relation to quality.

Celery ... Choose fresh, crisp stalks that are thick and solid with good heart formation.



Corn, sweet ... Select only corn that is cold to the touch. Husks should be green, not dry or yellowish.

Cucumbers ... Look for medium sizes with good green color. Avoid very large, puffy ones or any having a yellow color.



Eggplant ... Should be firm and heavy for their size, with dark purple to purple-black skin.

Endive/Escarole/Chicory ... Should be fresh, clean, crisp and cold. Avoid dry, yellowing or wilted leaves or those showing reddish discoloration of the hearts.

Greens (collards, turnip, beet, kale) ... Choose fresh young and crisp green leaves. Avoid any with coarse stems or wilted, yellowing leaves.

Leeks (large green onions) ... Select well-blanching bunches (white coloring extending 2" to 3" from bulb base). Choose small or medium leeks for the most tender eating. Refrigerate in a plastic bag and use within three to five days.

Lettuce, Iceberg ... Heads should be firm but "give" slightly when squeezed. At home, core the head by whacking it core-end down on the kitchen counter. Twist to remove the core and rinse end up under running cold water. Drain thoroughly in a colander or rack with its cored-end down. Store in a tightly closed plastic bag or lettuce crisper.

Lettuce, other ... Select clean, fresh and tender heads.



Mushrooms ... May be white, tan, or cream-colored. The freshest mushrooms are closed around the stem by a thin tissue strip. However, those that have opened due to water loss are just as nutritious but have a more pungent flavor. Refrigerate and cover with a damp paper towel to aid in moisture-retention. Avoid storing in plastic bags; this hampers air circulation.

Okra ... Pods should be young and tender, preferably 2" to 4" long. Avoid dull, dry or shriveled pods.

Onions, dry ... Choose onions that are clean and firm. The skins should be dry, smooth and crackly. Avoid onions with wet, soggy necks, soft or spongy bulbs, which indicate decay. Keep at room temperature, cool, in a well-ventilated area. May be refrigerated; above all, keep dry. They can be stored three to four weeks.

Onions, green ... Select young and tender bunches with fresh green tops.

Keep refrigerated in a plastic bag and use as soon as possible.

Parsnips . . . Smooth, firm, well-shaped of small to medium size. Discoloration may be an indication of freezing.

Peppers . . . Should be fresh, firm, thick-fleshed with bright green coloring which may be tinged with red. Immature peppers are usually soft and dull-looking.

Potatoes . . . Choose firm, clean and relatively smooth ones free of cuts or bruises. Avoid green-colored potatoes and those with sprouts. Never refrigerate potatoes but keep them in a cool, well-ventilated dark area. Keep away from light (which can cause greening) and moisture.



Radishes . . . Variety of sizes and shapes available. All should be fresh, smooth and well-formed with few cuts, pits or black spots. Avoid spongy radishes.

Rhubarb . . . Select bright, crisp and firm stalks of medium size. Oversized stalks may be tough.

Rutabagas . . . Should be firm, heavy for its size, smooth and not deeply cut or punctured. Size is not a quality factor.

Spinach . . . Leaves should be clean and fresh, of a dark green color. Avoid any with large yellow leaves or those which are wilted or discolored.

Squash, soft-skinned (summer) . . . Should be fresh, heavy for its size and tender. Choose small to medium sizes. Refrigerate and use as soon as possible.

Squash, hard-shelled (winter) . . . Avoid any with soft areas. Well adapted to long storage periods. Hub-

bards can be stored six months or longer; acorn squash, three to six months. Store in a dry, well-ventilated area at room temperature. Don't refrigerate.

Sweet Potatoes . . . Choose firm, well-shaped and evenly colored blemish-free skins. Select thick medium-sized sweet potatoes, tapering at both ends. Handle gently to avoid bruising. Do not refrigerate. Store in a cool, dry, well-ventilated area.

Tomatoes . . . Choose smooth, firm and plump looking tomatoes with good color. Most tomatoes require further ripening at home. Place away from direct sunlight. Putting tomatoes in a bag hastens ripening. When red-ripe, refrigerate and use within a few days.

Turnips . . . Should be firm, smooth and of medium size. Avoid yellowed or wilted tops, which indicate old age.



MEAT AND
POULTRY
HOTLINE

Q & A —on Summertime Food Safety

Summertime living is easy, true. Lazy days at the beach. Cookouts. But summer's high temperatures also make the living easy for the kinds of bacteria that cause food poisoning.

So you have to keep hot weather food safety in mind.

These answers to the kinds of questions that come in on USDA's Meat and Poultry Hotline should help you keep summertime eating both safe and easy.

Q: I've heard that food poisoning is more of a problem in the summer

heat. If that's true, what are the reasons for it?

A: It's most definitely true. In fact, food poisoning incidents show a sharp increase in warmer weather. There are two main reasons for this.

First, food poisoning bacteria grow rapidly in temperatures of 80°F and above. So if you're not careful to keep perishable food — particularly meat and poultry — on ice, these bacteria can multiply and make you sick. How can this happen? Many common food poisoners can double in under 20 minutes. Let's say you have 400 of these bacteria in a chicken salad at the start of a picnic. You forget and leave the salad out of the cooler all afternoon. You'd have 800 bacteria in 20 minutes, 1,600 in 40 minutes and 3,200 in an hour. On a very hot day, if you didn't eat the salad until several hours later, you could get enough food poisoning bacteria or its poisons to make you sick.

Second, the lure of fine summer weather often brings large groups outside for picnics, barbecues, graduation parties and so forth. Unfortunately, from the food safety standpoint, this can set the stage for trouble. People inexperienced in preparing food in such large amounts often make mistakes in cooking and cold-storing the food. This is what leads to the story you read in the paper of "30 sick after neighborhood picnic."

To avoid these problems, whether you're having a large party or just a simple cookout for the family, follow these rules: Keep perishable food refrigerated or on ice until you're ready to serve it. Cook meat and poultry thoroughly and serve it while it's hot. For more information, you can order: "The Safe Food Book," USDA Home and Garden Bulletin No. 241, from USDA-FSIS Public Awareness, Rm. 1163-South Building, Washington, DC 20250. Single copies are free.

Q: I know you're supposed to keep picnic foods on ice when you're on a summer outing, but it isn't easy. Halfway through the afternoon, my ice is usually gone and I have a couple

of deviled eggs and two pieces of chicken in a plastic bowl swimming in chilly water. Advice, please.

A: Since high temperatures for a sufficient time will defeat any cooler, the best you can do is lengthen your safe cooling time. Tips? Pack cold foods from your refrigerator at home. Use a well-insulated cooler with plenty of ice or freeze-pak inserts, and pack your soft drinks in chilled aluminum cans. This means that everything inside the cooler is as cold as possible when you start out. Then, when possible, set the cooler in the shade. And keep the lid on. This seems obvious — it keeps hot air out — but many people forget.

Q: I've read so much about the dangers of mayonnaise in summer salads that I've almost quit making them. Is mayonnaise really a summer-time food hazard?

A: Absolutely not. Mayonnaise is not a villain! While all

mayonnaise-based salads should be kept on ice, commercial mayonnaise actually slows the growth of many food poisoning bacteria. This is due to the acid it contains as "lemon" flavoring. The exception is homemade mayo. If you use a bland recipe without added acid such as lemon juice, you must be especially careful to keep it cold.

Q: In the paper today there was a recipe for marinating pork ribs. Sounds good, but it calls for leaving

the meat out in the sauce for 8 hours. That seems wrong to me.

A: You're right. Most marinades contain acid, which slows bacterial growth, but 8 hours is still too long to leave meat out in hot weather. When a recipe calls for "steeping" meat and poultry over an hour, do it in the



refrigerator where the low temperature will protect the food.

If you plan to grill your ribs outside, there are some cooking precautions you should consider too. It's probably smart to lightly boil the ribs in the house, then immediately take them out to the grill. Cook them over a medium fire, basting with the marinade sauce until well-done. When done, ribs should be grey-brown all the way to the bone. Thorough cooking of pork is critical to protect against trichinosis, an infrequent but painful muscle disease.

Q: We just got a new backyard grill and my husband can't wait to try chicken on it. I'm a little bit leery as I've never cooked chicken outside. What do I need to know?

A: Chicken legs or parts are easy to cook on a grill because they cook fairly quickly without drying out, but whole or half chickens require a bit

more finesse. It's suggested that you start with a broiler (a young, tender chicken) of three pounds or less. This type of bird will cook more quickly and stay more moist than a larger one. Ask your butcher for a bird that is split down the back. When you have medium-hot coals, put the halves rib-side-down on foil over the grill. The bony rib-cage conducts heat to the

meat quickly. Turn halfway through cooking, and put the breast meat toward the coals.

Make sure you cook the chicken thoroughly. When it's done a meat thermometer inserted into the thigh muscle should register 185°F. If you don't have a thermometer, you can prick the thigh meat with a fork. Juices should run yellow, not pink. You can also "shake hands with the chicken." Shake the drumstick. When it moves well in the socket, the bird is safely cooked.

The Meat and Poultry Hotline is going toll-free. For more details, see the Summer issue of "Food News for Consumers."

Q: I'm in charge of the company picnic this year, and I'd like to serve something new and different. I'm thinking about barbequing a turkey. Any suggestions?

A: Actually turkey is an excellent choice for a large group. It's economical, nutritious and low in fat. Slathered with barbeque sauce and turned slowly on a rotisserie, it makes a wonderful entree.

To be thoroughly and safely

cooked — to kill any bacteria that might be present — turkey should reach 185°F. To test for doneness, insert a meat thermometer into the thigh, not touching fat or bone.

For details on cooking turkey outdoors, see "Talking About Turkey," USDA Home and Garden Bulletin No. 243, pages 12-13. Order the book from USDA-FSIS Public Awareness, Rm. 1163-South Building, Washington, DC 20250. Single copies are free.

Q: Help!

We've had a brown-out

on our street again, and the refrigerator freezing compartment is off. The popsicles already feel like mud slush, and the frozen vegetables are fading fast, not to mention the bargain I just got on a box of steaks. What should I do?

A: Your popsicles, of course, are lost. But if you can get power back in five or six hours, you shouldn't have a safety problem with the meat and vegetables. Just keep the door to the freezing compartment closed. Every time you peer in to "check it," you let more hot air in, diminishing its cooling capacity.

If you're really concerned about the steaks, if possible put them in a friend's freezer, or add block or dry ice to your own unit. Caution: Handle dry ice carefully. Never touch it with your hands — it freezes everything it touches. And work with it only in a well-ventilated area. Be sure to get full instructions from the dealer.

Q: With school out, my kids, 5 and 7, are in and out of the kitchen all day. They are constantly fixing snacks or wanting to help me cook. The problem is they don't like to wash their hands. How can I explain to them, in a way they'll understand, why they have to wash their hands?

A: If you have a magnifying glass, have them examine their hands with it. Show them how the surfaces of their fingers and palms are not really smooth like glass, but ridged and broken by tiny lines and creases.

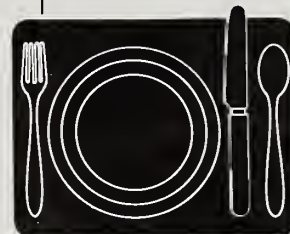
Explain that if they had a very strong magnifying glass, like a microscope, they'd see that the surface of the hand looks like a sponge. Bacteria, which are very small, hide in all those cracks and crevices. They hide under and around the fingernails. Then they get into your food.

To stay healthy, you have to fight back by washing your hands before you eat or prepare food. Soap kills bacteria.

— Mary Ann Parmley

The Meat and Poultry Hotline (202) 472-4485 is a consumer service of the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Staffed by trained professionals, the hotline operates 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. EDT weekdays. After-hours an answering machine takes your name and number for call-back.

Hotline staff handle questions on the safe handling and storage of meat and poultry, how to tell if it's safe to eat, and how to read meat and poultry labels. They can also help you evaluate problems with meat and poultry products.



HEALTH AND NUTRITION

Herbs Instead of Salt

Herbs can provide creative, tasty alternatives to salt for flavoring foods. Through the skillful use of herbs and spices, imaginative flavors can be created and simple foods made into gourmet delights.

Herbs and spices differ only in that herbs tend to be plants grown in temperate areas while spices grow in tropical regions. Many people prefer to grow their own herbs to have a fresh supply throughout the growing season, thereby assuring top quality.

Professional cooks prefer fresh herbs, if available. But fresh herbs are less concentrated, and two to three times as much should be used if a recipe calls for dried herbs.

There are no strict limits to the use of herbs. A good general rule is not to mix two very strong herbs together. Rather, one strong and one or more milder flavors create the most harmonious blends.

Here are some tips for cooking with herbs and spices:

- In general, the weaker the flavor of the main food in the recipe, the lower the level of added seasoning required to achieve a satisfactory balance of

flavor in the end product.

- Dried herbs are stronger than fresh, and powdered herbs are stronger than crumbled. A useful formula is: $\frac{1}{4}$ teaspoon powdered herbs = $\frac{3}{4}$ to 1 teaspoon crumbled = 2 teaspoons fresh.

Strong Flavors: These should be used with care — approximately one teaspoon for six servings of a recipe — since their flavors stand out. They include bay, cardamom, curry, ginger, hot peppers, mustard, pepper (black), rosemary and sage.

Medium Flavors: A moderate amount of these is recommended — one to two teaspoons for six servings. They are basil, celery seed and leaves, cumin, dill, fennel, French tarragon, garlic, marjoram, mint, oregano, sa-

vory (winter and summer), thyme and turmeric.

Delicate Flavors: These may be used in large quantities and combine well with most other herbs and spices. This group includes burnet, (plants in the rose family), chervil, chives and parsley.

Other options are interesting herb blends that can be placed in shakers and used instead of salt:

Saltless surprise: 2 teaspoons garlic powder and 1 teaspoon each of basil, oregano and powdered lemon rind (or dehydrated lemon juice). Put ingredients into a blender and mix well. Store in glass container, label well and add rice to prevent caking.

Pungent salt substitute: 3 teaspoons basil, 2 teaspoons each of savory (summer savory is best), celery seed, ground cumin seed, sage and marjoram, and 1 teaspoon lemon rind. Mix well and pulverize.

Spicy saltless seasoning: 1 teaspoon each of cloves, pepper and coriander seed (crushed), 2 teaspoons paprika, and 1 teaspoon rosemary. Mix ingredients in a blender. Store in an airtight container.

What Goes With What

Soups: bay, chervil, French tarragon, marjoram, parsley, savory, rosemary.

Poultry: garlic, oregano, rosemary, savory, sage.

Beef: bay, chives, clovers, cumin, garlic, hot pepper, marjoram, rosemary, savory.

Lamb: garlic, marjoram, oregano, rosemary, thyme (make little slits in lamb to be roasted and insert herbs).

Pork: coriander, cumin, garlic, ginger, hot peppers, pepper, sage, savory, thyme.

For more information on herbs, contact Holly Shimizu, National Arboretum, 3501 New York Avenue, N.E., Washington, D.C. 20002, (202) 475-4865, or see "Do Yourself A Flavor," *FDA Consumer*, April 1984. For single free copies, write: USDA-FSIS, Public Awareness, Room 1163-South Bldg., Washington, D.C. 20250.



Fresh and subtly fragrant... Holly Shimizu, curator of the National Herb Garden, harvests sprigs of bay leaf.

The Consumer's Almanac

The story goes that farmers used to find the almanac so useful they would nail it to the barn wall. This list of events, too, covering the next 3 months, is designed for saving.

Event	Theme	Contact
National Asparagus Month May 1-31	Emphasis on easy preparation, diet aspects of asparagus	Dick Martin Washington Asparagus Growers Association Sunnyside, Wash. (509) 837-6022
National High Blood Pressure Month May 1-31	Make "control" your lifetime goal	High Blood Pressure Information Center Bethesda, Md. (301) 496-1809
National Physical Fitness and Sports Month May 1-31	"Shape Up, America"	Matthew Guidry, PhD. President's Council on Physical Fitness and Sports Washington, D.C.
Dairy Month June 1-30	"Have a Dairy Good Summer" — Focus on many healthful dairy products	Jane Holmes American Dairy Association Rosemont, Ill. (312) 696-1880
National Baked Bean Month July 1-31	High-protein beans also provide dietary fiber	James Byrum Michigan Bean Commission Lansing, Mich. (517) 694-0581
National Hot Dog Month July 1-31	Emphasis on convenience and versatility with toppings	Fran Aultman National Hot Dog and Sausage Council Oakbrook, Ill. (312) 986-6224
National Blueberry Month July 1-31	Peak month for fresh, vitamin C-rich blueberries	Myrtle L. Ruch North American Blueberry Council Marmora, N.J. (609) 399-1559
National Peach Month July 1-31	Peak, season for fresh, nutritious peaches	Lillie Hoover National Peach Council Martinsburg, West Va. (304) 267-6024

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